Macrobius

(fl. c. 400)

BRIEFING

Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius, usually referred to as Macrobius (fl. c. AD 400), was a Roman provincial who lived during the early fifth century, during late antiquity, the period of time corresponding to the Later Roman Empire, and when Latin was as widespread as Greek among the elite. He is primarily known for his writings, which include the widely copied and read *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* ("Commentary on the Dream of Scipio") about *Somnium Scipionis*, which was one of the most important sources for Neoplatonism in the Latin West during the Middle Ages; the *Saturnalia*, a compendium of ancient Roman religious and antiquarian lore; and *De differentiis et societatibus graeci latinique verbi* ("On the Differences and Similarities of the Greek and Latin Verb"), which is now lost. He is the basis for the protagonist Manlius in Iain Pears' book *The Dream of Scipio*.

NAME

Macrobius's given name (*praenomen*) is unrecorded as is his family name (*nomen*). His recorded name is a series of three surnames (*cognomina*), properly ordered Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius. This is what appears in the earliest surviving manuscripts of the *Saturnalia* and how he is addressed in the excerpts from his lost *De Differentiis*. He is called "Macrobius Theodosius" in both Cassiodorus and Boethius and was apparently known during his lifetime as "Theodosius": The dedication of *De Differentiis* is "Theodosius to his Symmachus" (*Theodosius Symmacho suo*) and he addressed as "the very greatest Theodosius" (*Theodosi optime*) in a dedicatory epistle to Avianus's *Fables*. This was mistakenly reversed in later manuscripts to "Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius", which James Willis then used in his edition of the *Commentary.*

LIFE

Little is known for certain about Macrobius, but there are many theories and speculations about him. He states at the beginning of his *Saturnalia* that he was "born under a foreign sky" (*sub alio ortus caelo*), and both of his major works are dedicated to his son, Eustachius. Alan Cameron notes that several of the earliest manuscripts of his works spell his son's name *Eustathius*, then after pointing out that a certain Plotinus Eustathius was Urban prefect in 462 observes "Plotinus would be a peculiarly appropriate name for a neoplatonist philosopher and keen admirer of the great Lycopolitan (cf. *Comm*. I, 8, 5) to have given his son." There is also a Macrobius Plotinus Eudoxius who collaborated with Memmius Symmachus over an edition of Macrobius' *Commentary.* His major works have led experts to assume that he was a pagan.

Which "foreign sky" Macrobius was born under has been the subject of much speculation. Terrot Glover considers Macrobius either an ethnic Greek, or born in one of the Greek-speaking parts of the Roman Empire, such as Egypt, due to his intimate knowledge of Greek literature. J. E. Sandys went further and argued that Macrobius was born in one of the Greek provinces. However other experts, beginning with Ludwig van Jan, point out that despite his familiarity with Greek literature Macrobius was far more familiar with Latin than Greek—as evidenced by his enthusiasm for Vergil and Cicero—and favor North Africa, which was part of the Latin-speaking portion of the Roman Empire.

Scholars have attempted to identify him with a Macrobius who is mentioned in the *Codex Theodosianus* as a praetorian prefect of Spain (399–400), and a proconsul of Africa (410). The *Codex Theodosianus* also records a *praepositus* (or lord chamberlain) named Macrobius in 422. A number of older authorities go so far as to identify Macrobius the author with the first, and date his *floruit* to 399–410. There are objections to either identification: as Alan Cameron notes, the complete name of the first candidate is attested in an inscription to be "Flavius Macrobius Maximianus", while the second is excluded because "A *praepositus* must at this period have been a eunuch."

However, since Macrobius is frequently referred to as *vir clarissimus et inlustris* (lit. "most famous and illustrious man"), a title which was achieved by holding public office, we can reasonably expect his name to appear in the *Codex Theodosianus*. Further, Cameron points out that during his lifetime Macrobius was referred to as "Theodosius", and looking for that name Cameron found a Theodosius who was praetorian prefect of Italy in 430. "It is significant that the only surviving law addressed to this Theodosius sanctions a privilege for Africa Proconsularis on the basis of information received concerning Byzacena," Cameron notes.

WORKS

Macrobius's most influential book and one of the most widely cited books of the Middle Ages was a commentary on the book *Dream of Scipio* narrated by Cicero at the end of his *Republic*. The nature of the dream, in which the elder Scipio appears to his (adopted) grandson and describes the life of the good after death and the constitution of the universe from a Stoic and Neo-Platonic point of view, gave occasion for Macrobius to discourse upon the nature of the cosmos, transmitting much classical philosophy to the later Middle Ages. In astronomy, this work is noted for giving the diameter of the Sun as twice the diameter of the Earth. Of a third work *On the Differences and Similarities of the Greek and Latin Verb*, we possess only an abstract by a certain Johannes, doubtfully identified with Johannes Scotus Eriugena (9th century).

See editions by Ludwig von Jan (1848–1852, with a bibliography of previous editions, and commentary), Franz Eyssenhardt (1893, Teubner text), James Willis (1994, new Teubner), and R. A. Kaster (OCT and Loeb, 2011); on the sources of the *Saturnalia* see H. Linke (1880) and Georg Wissowa (1880). The grammatical treatise will be found in Jan's edition and Heinrich Keil's *Grammatici latini*; see also Georg Friedrich Schömann, *Commentatio macrobiana* (1871).

Macrobius's *Saturnalia* (Latin: *Saturnaliorum Libri Septem*, "Seven Books of the Saturnalia") consists of an account of the discussions held at the house of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus during the holiday of the Saturnalia. It contains a great variety of curious historical, mythological, critical, antiquarian and grammatical discussions. "The work takes the form of a series of dialogues among learned men at a fictional banquet."

Commentariii in Somnium Scipionis

Commentary on Cicero's Dream of Scipio (Latin: *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*) is a philosophical treatise of Macrobius based on the famous dream narrated in *On the republic* of Cicero (Chapter VI, 9-29).

In Cicero's work, Scipio Africanus appears to his adoptive grandson, Scipio Aemilianus, and reveals him his future destiny, and that of his country, explains the rewards that await the virtuous man in another life, describes the universe and the place of the Earth and of man inside the universe.

Macrobius does not offer an exhaustive comment of the text of Cicero, but expounds a series of theories on the dreams from neoplatonic background, on the mystic properties of the numbers, on the nature of the soul, on astronomy and on music. He quotes a number of authorities, but is unlikely to have read them all, or even the majority. Plotinus and Porphyry are his main sources, and he quotes frequently from Virgil with ornamental purpose. Nevertheless, the work incorporates ideas of neoplatonism that have not been preserved in a direct form elsewhere. The style is quite uneven, since Macrobius copies or translates his sources without unifying the style.

Saturnalia

Saturnalia (Latin: *Saturnaliorum Libri Septem*, "Seven Books of the Saturnalia") is a work written after c. 431 CE by the Roman provincial Macrobius Theodosius. The *Saturnalia* consists of an account of the discussions held at the house of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus during the holiday of the Saturnalia. It contains a great variety of curious historical, mythological, critical, antiquarian and grammatical discussions.

Background

Saturnalia is a late example of the Symposium genre pioneered by Plato and Xenophon. It is written as a series of scholarly dialogues at fictional banquets held over the eve of Saturnalia and three days of the holiday, December 16–19. In each book, one of the characters does the bulk of the speaking on the topic.

Principal characters

Macrobius threw together characters from different times and places in an anachronistic gathering. Some are historical figures, primarily from the 4th century in the Roman Empire. Others are fictional or very loosely associated with obscure figures.

- **Praetextatus**: Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, a wealthy pagan aristocrat.
- **Flavianus**: Virius Nicomachus Flavianus, vicar of Africa, prefect & consul.
- **Symmachus**: Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, orator, author, and politician.
- **Decius**: Caecina Decius Albinus Iunior, prefect of Rome and father of Caecina Decius Aginatius Albinus.
- **Rufius Albinus**: prefect of Rome.
- **Eustathius**: Greek philosopher.
- **Evangelus**: an aristocrat from Tibur.
- **Avienus**: a young aristocrat.
- **Eusebius**: a Greek teacher of rhetoric.
- **Servius**: a grammarian.
- **Dysarius**: a physician.
- **Horus**: a former boxer and Cynic philosopher.

Contents

The first book is devoted to an inquiry as to the origin of the Saturnalia and the festivals of Janus, which leads to a history and discussion of the Roman calendar, and to an attempt to derive all forms of worship from that of the Sun.[6] The second book begins with a collection of *bons mots*, to which all present make their contributions, many of them being ascribed to Cicero and Augustus; a discussion of various pleasures, especially of the senses, then seems to have taken place, but almost the whole of this is lost. The third, fourth, fifth and sixth books are devoted to Virgil, dwelling respectively on his learning in religious matters, his rhetorical skill, his debt to Homer (with a comparison of the art of the two) and to other Greek writers, and the nature and extent of his borrowings from the earlier Latin poets. The latter part of the third book is taken up with a dissertation upon luxury and the sumptuary laws intended to check it, which is probably a dislocated portion of the second book. The seventh book consists largely of the discussion of various physiological questions.

The primary value of the work lies in the facts and opinions quoted from earlier writers. The form of the *Saturnalia* is copied from Plato's *Symposium* and Gellius's *Noctes atticae*; the chief authorities (whose names, however, are not quoted) are Gellius, Seneca the philosopher, Plutarch (*Quaestiones conviviales*), Athenaeus and the commentaries of Servius and others on Virgil.

Editions and translations

- Robert A. Kaster (ed.), *Macrobius: Saturnalia*. Loeb classical library 510–512. Cambridge, MA/ London: Harvard University Press, 2011. 3 volumes.

- Percival Vaughan Davies (trans.), *Macrobius: The Saturnalia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.

- William Harris Stahl (trans.), *Macrobius: Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1952. (Second printing, with revisions, 1966)

- Macrobius, Ambrosius Aurelius Theodosius (1400s). *Seven Books of the Saturnalia: Codex from the Plutei Collection of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence* (in Latin). World Digital Library. Retrieved 2014-02-28.

LEGACY

A prominent lunar crater is named after Macrobius.

Macrobius Cove in Antarctica is named after Macrobius.